The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Volgograd, Veterans Savor WWII Victory

By Alexander Winning

May 09, 2012



"The Motherland Calls" statue on the Mamayev Kurgan hill **Alexander Winning**

VOLGOGRAD — Every May 9, Alexander Ivanovich Kolotushkin dusts off his best suit, gets out his medals from the cabinet and heads to Volgograd's main square with fellow veterans.

"There used to be more of us. I remember that 10 years ago there were at least 70 veterans in the city; now there are only 17," he said, holding out a list of names and phone numbers, many of which had been crossed out.

A retired colonel in the Soviet Red Army, Kolotushkin volunteered to serve on the western front with his father and two brothers and went on to take part in the Battle of Kursk and the race to Berlin.

He was later awarded the Order of the Red Star and several medals for bravery in battle.

Despite the trauma of his time at the front, the diminutive 85-year-old insists that the sweet smell of victory is what has stayed with him after all these years.

With a jubilant smile, he tells of the time his division entered KЂnigsberg, modern-day Kaliningrad, chanting "Hitler kaput" as they passed a statue of Immanuel Kant that was missing an arm.

"And then there was our reception in Moscow. Stalin ordered the whole division to be given 100 grams [of vodka], and we were showered with flowers," he said.

Sixty-seven years since the war ended, the exploits of veterans such as Kolotushkin are still remembered countrywide at Victory Day celebrations, which the southern city of Volgograd in particular prides itself on.

This time around, the city hosted more than 100 events over the extended May holidays. Concerts, exhibitions and dance performances lent the center a celebratory mood, with locals and guests mixing freely and visiting open-air events side by side.

A delegation of Ukrainian veterans watching the military parade Wednesday morning said they were left speechless by what they saw, standing for the Russian national anthem before embracing their former brothers in arms.

In a more unusual tribute, earlier that day local motorists roared through the city, which stretches more than 80 kilometers along the Volga River, deafening passersby with patriotic honking and car radios cranked up to full volume.

A three-dimensional, 1 1/2-hour video show called "Pages of History Come Alive," which was projected onto the New Experimental Theater daily on May 6 to 8 at a reported cost of 8 million rubles ($270,000), provided a spectacular visual highlight, telling a stirring story of the trials Russia has faced since the tsarist period.

May 9 festivities have traditionally held a special significance in Volgograd — better known under its former name, Stalingrad — for the role the city's defenders played in turning the tide of the war against Hitler's invading forces.

In one of the bloodiest battles of the 21st century, roughly half a million Soviet soldiers and civilians perished defending the western bank of the Volga, which held strategic importance for the Axis army driving southward to secure supplies of oil from the fields surrounding Baku.

National pride in Stalingrad's heroic resistance and recognition of its significance abroad have meant that previous May holidays have drawn high-profile guests here, most notably from within the walls of the Kremlin.

In 2010, then-President Dmitry Medvedev flew in to check on Victory Day preparations and distribute medals to local war heroes; last year, his mentor and then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made a similar trip in early May.

Although neither Putin nor Medvedev made the 900-kilometer trip Wednesday, military attaches from Britain, France and Germany were in attendance, laying wreaths to commemorate those who died in the war.

Lieutenant Colonel Adrian Coghill, an assistant naval attache with the British Embassy

in Moscow, said he had been "struck by the tragedy of the city's history." German air force Colonel Thorsten Koehler said he felt "touched by the warmth of the reception, which as a German visitor is not always taken as a given."

Completing the list of attendees, national political parties and local politicians were also out in force over the holiday period, with the flags of the parties they represent never far behind.

At a Tuesday ceremony on the Mamayev Kurgan hill, where the Stalingrad memorial complex and Motherland Calls statue stand, Sergei Bozhenov, the recently installed governor of the Volgograd region, led proceedings, trailed by a snaking line of United Russia, Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party and Yabloko activists.

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